

From the Archives

Transformation circa 1861 — Precision Drill

During the secession crisis and the early months of the Civil War, tens of thousands of men on each side eagerly entered military service. Transforming such hordes of enthusiastic volunteers into an effective fighting force was a problem confronting both North and South during that period. The major element in such transformation was repeated practice of close order drill. Yet with many drillmasters themselves inexperienced and with even some experienced ones being of doubtful competence, some curious maneuvers resulted, never contemplated by those who drew up the drill manuals. A South Carolina officer later recounted one such incident:

Immediately after the ordinance of secession had been passed, and it became apparent that there would be war, the attention of the Southern youth was directed almost exclusively to Hardee's tactics, and especially the drill of the company. A military company was organized in nearly every neighborhood all over the country, and the rivalry between them, as well as the interest elicited from their civilian friends and admirers, was immense. There was a very fine company organized in Memphis, which acquired a wide reputation for excellence in all the evolutions. It was commanded by a Mexican [War] veteran who was a master of tactics and a martinet in drill. Every afternoon a throng of people would resort to the large vacant lot where this company was receiving instruction, to witness and applaud its performances. On one occasion, when an unusually large and appreciative crowd was collected, and many ladies present, the captain became so enthused that, after exhausting every recognized movement, he began to extemporize, and shouted out the command, "Company, right and left oblique; march!" The men gallantly essayed to obey the order, and diverging from the center toward the flanks, scattered widely. The captain racked his brain for a proper command to bring them together again, but the tactics provided no formula for such a dilemma. At length, when the boys had become strung out like a flock of wild pigeons and seemed about to separate forever, he yelled out, in desperation, "Huddle, gol darn ye!"

Source: Richard J. Sommers, ed., *Vignettes of Military History, Volume II* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army Military History Institute, October 1978), Vignette No. 47, contributed by Miss Alexandra Campbell, from W. S. Dunlop, *Lee's Sharpshooters* (Little Rock, Ark.: Tunnah & Pittard, 1899).